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WHO FIRST SAW THE LABRADOR COAST?

BY

A. S. PACKARD.

THOSE rovers of the northern seas, the Norsemen, pushing out from the fiords of Greenland in their one-masted craft, no larger than our coasters or mackerel boats, without doubt sighted and coasted along "the Labrador" nearly five centuries before John Cabot made his first land-fall of the American Continent.

The Labrador coast was not, however, the first American land visited by the Norsemen.*

Kohl states that New England was first discovered by Biarne, in 990. It appears that Heriulf, one of the earliest colonists of Greenland, had a son, Biarne, "who, at the time his father went over from Iceland to Greenland, had been absent on a trading voyage in Norway. Returning to Iceland in 990, and finding that his father, with Eric the Red, had gone to the west, he resolved to follow him and to spend the next winter with him in Greenland.

"They boldly set sail to the south-west, but having

* We should acknowledge that, not having access to the primitive sources in which the voyages of the Norsemen to the American shores are described, we have placed our dependence on the account given by a learned German geographer, J. G. Kohl, in his *History of the Discovery of Maine*, as the most authoritative exposition of early voyages and discoveries in north-western America. Kohl's views are based on Rafn's *Antiquitates Americanae*. (*Documentary History of the State of Maine. Collections of the Maine Historical Society. Second Series, Vol. I. 1869*).

encountered northerly storms, after many days' sail they lost their course, and when the weather cleared, they descried land, not, however, like that described to them as 'Greenland.' They saw that it was a much more southern land, and covered with forests. It not being the intention of Biarne to explore new countries, but only to find the residence of his father in Greenland, he improved a south-west wind, and turned to the north-east, and put himself on the track for Greenland. After several days' sailing, during which he discovered and sailed by other well-wooded lands lying on his left, some high and mountainous and bordered by icebergs, he reached Heriulfsnäs, the residence of his father, in Greenland. His return passage occupied nine days, and he speaks of three distinct tracts of land, along which he coasted, one of which he supposed to have been a large island."

So much for the facts taken from the Norse records and sagas. Dr. Kohl then goes on to say: "That Biarne, on this voyage, must have seen some part of the American east coast, is clear from his having been driven that way from Iceland by northerly gales. We cannot determine with any certainty what part of our coast he sighted, and what was the southern extent of his cruise. But taking into consideration all circumstances and statements of the report, it appears probable that it was part of the coast of New England, and perhaps Cape Cod, which stands far out to the east. One day and night's sailing with a favorable wind, was, in Iceland and Norway, reckoned to be about the distance of thirty German miles. Two days and 'nights,' therefore, would be sixty German miles, and this is about the distance from Cape Cod in New England to Cape Sable in Nova Scotia."

That the land first seen by Bjarne was necessarily so far south as Cape Cod does not, we would venture to submit, follow from the facts we have quoted. Is it not more probable that the country was some portion of Nova Scotia, a land "as much covered with forests" as New England?

But Dr. Kohl maintains that the second land which was "well-wooded" was Nova Scotia. In his own words:

"The second country seen by Bjarne must, then, probably have been Nova Scotia. The distance from Nova Scotia to Newfoundland is about three days' sail; and from Newfoundland to the southern part of Greenland, a Northman navigator, with fresh breezes, might easily sail in four days, and thus Newfoundland was probably the third country discovered by Bjarne."

We should not have the hardihood to criticize Dr. Kohl's statements and conclusions, if we had not made two voyages to Labrador, in which we sailed from Cape Cod to Nova Scotia, skirted that coast, approached within a mile of Cape Ray, Newfoundland, and spent a summer on the northern shores of Belle Isle, opposite Newfoundland; and a second summer in coasting Labrador as far north as Hopedale. Hence the general appearances of the Nova Scotian, Newfoundland and Labrador coasts are, though in a slight degree, to be sure, known to us.

The records state that the southernmost land seen by Bjarne was "covered by forests;" this would apply to Nova Scotia as well as to the coast of Massachusetts. It is then said that without landing, improving a south-west wind and steering north-east, "he put himself on the track for Greenland." This would be the course from Cape Cod to Nova Scotia it is true, but such a course

would also take him from the eastern end of Nova Scotia to Cape Race, Newfoundland, while from the present position of St. John's the course to the site of the Greenland Norse settlements is a northerly one.

As Kohl states, the distance from Nova Scotia to Newfoundland is about three days' sail; but the wind would have to be strong and fair all the time, for the distance from Halifax to St. John's, Newfoundland, is about 530 miles. A Viking's ship was by no means a modern cutter either in her lines or rig. We have seen in the Sogne fiord a vessel of forty or fifty tons, her hull clumsy and broad, with her single mast placed midships and carrying a square sail; her stern rather high, and her prow rising five or six feet above the bows. A Norwegian friend observed to me at the time, "There," said he, "hang the gunwale of that vessel with shields and fill her with armed men, and you would have a Viking's ship!" We doubt whether Biarne's craft could have made in "one day and night's sailing with a favorable wind," more than 138 statute miles, or thirty German miles. At such a rate it would take from five to six days to go from Halifax to St. John's, Newfoundland. The passage by a swift ocean steamer of the Allan Line requires from forty-two to forty-eight hours.

Passing by Newfoundland, which is well-wooded, except on the more exposed north-eastern coast, Biarne, sailing by a land "said to be high and mountainous, and bordered by icebergs, reached Heriulfsnäs." This land could have been none other than the Labrador coast from the mouth of the Straits of Belle Isle northward.

If Biarne's return passage occupied only nine days, he could not possibly have sailed from Cape Cod to

Greenland in that time. A nine days' trip from Boston to the Labrador coast at the mouth of the Strait of Belle Isle is a remarkably short one for an ordinary fishing schooner.

The distance from Boston to the Greenland coast a little north of Cape Farewell, where the southernmost Norse settlements were made, is about 2,300 miles. The southern coast of Labrador is about half way. The exact sailing distance from Thomaston, Maine, to Caribou Island, Strait of Belle Isle, Labrador, is 910 miles.

The "Nautilus," the vessel in which I first sailed to Labrador, was a staunch schooner of 140 tons. She sailed from Thomaston, Maine, June 27, and passing around Cape Breton, reached Caribou Island in ten days* (July 7th): after leaving our party on the Labrador coast, she set sail for Greenland July 9th, over nearly the same route as the Norsemen must have taken. From Captain Ranlett of the "Nautilus," I learn that he first sighted land on the coast of Greenland on the 17th, in lat. $62^{\circ} 58'$, and long. $52^{\circ} 05'$. The land first seen was about lat. $63^{\circ} 10'$, long. $50^{\circ} 45'$. This is about fifty miles south of Fiskernaes, and 25 miles north of Frederickshaab. The voyage to Greenland was thus made in about nine days, as the vessel did not reach land before the 18th. The return voyage from Godthaab to Bonne Esperance, Labrador (three miles west from Caribou Island), was made in twelve days. The "Nautilus" left Godthaab Aug. 13th, and entered the Strait of Belle Isle Aug. 24th, anchoring at Bonne Esperance Aug. 25th. Then sailing from Bonne Esperance Aug. 26th, owing to

* Rev. C. C. Carpenter writes me that he sailed in a fishing smack from Caribou Island Oct. 3d, and made the shores of Maine on the 13th.

calms and a storm she did not reach Thomaston until September 11th, a period of about fifteen days. It thus appears that the voyage from the mouth of the Penobscot river, Maine, to southern Greenland, through the Gulf of St. Lawrence, a shorter route than that of the Northmen east of Newfoundland, took nineteen days, not including the detention on the Labrador coast, while the return voyage from southern Greenland to Maine required 27 days.

In 1864 my second trip to the Labrador coast was made in a Wellfleet oysterman, a schooner of about 140 tons, built for speed, with long spars and large sails. She was probably the fastest vessel which ever visited the Labrador coast. The voyage from Boston to Mecatina Island on the Labrador coast, through the Gut of Canso, was made in seven days; it was probably the quickest voyage from Massachusetts to Labrador ever made. We ran from Provincetown to Port Mulgrave in the Gut of Canso in just forty-eight hours. The return trip from Caribou Island to Boston, a distance of about nine hundred miles, was made in nine days. The average was therefore just a hundred miles a day. How could a Norseman's clumsy craft of forty or fifty tons, with but a mainsail and a jib, outdo such sailing as that?

The Norse record says that Biarne's "return passage occupied nine days," and Kohl adds that "from Newfoundland to the southern part of Greenland a Northman navigator, with fresh breezes, might easily sail in four days. But we have seen that with fresh breezes a modern schooner, at least three times as large as a Viking's ship, required eight or nine days to run from a

point but a few miles from northern Newfoundland, *i.e.*, Belle Isle, to southern Greenland. The distance from St. John's, Newfoundland, to the Norsemen's colonies in southern Greenland is not less than 1500 miles. To perform a voyage of this length in four days would be an impossibility for a modern yacht. It is not impossible, however, that Biarne sailed from southern Newfoundland to Greenland in a period of about nine days. But a voyage from Cap Cod to Greenland by an ordinary schooner requires at least three weeks, or from twenty to thirty days at the most.

Instead then of accepting Kohl's summary of Biarne's voyage stated on p. 63 of his work, we should be inclined to believe, as the results of the expedition, that Biarne was the first European to sight the coast of Newfoundland, possibly the eastern extremity of Nova Scotia, while he also saw the mountainous, desolate, treeless, rocky coast of Labrador.

The next Norse adventurer, Leif, the son of Erik, not only sighted the Labrador coast but landed on it. To this country he gave the name of stony land, or "Helluland," a name perpetuated in an Iceland map of 1570 by Sigurd Stephanius.

The records tell us that Leif, the son of Erik the Red, the first settler in Greenland, having bought Biarne's ship in the year 1000, manned her with a crew of thirty-five men, among whom was Biarne himself, and followed Biarne's track towards the south-west. Kohl then says: "They came first to that land which Biarne had last seen, which, as I have said, was probably our Newfoundland. Here they cast anchor and went on shore, for their voyage was not the search of a son after

his father, but a decided exploring expedition. They found the country as Biarne had described it, full of ice mountains, desolate, and its shores covered with large flat stones. Leif, therefore, called it 'Helluland' (the stony land)."

Here again we should differ from Kohl as to Leif's first landfall. A south-west course would naturally carry him to the Labrador coast, while the description—"full of ice mountains, desolate, and its shores covered with large flat stones"—well describes the barren, rockbound, treeless coast of Labrador, in distinction from the much lower, wooded coast of Newfoundland. Moreover St. John's, Newfoundland, lies nearly due south of the southern extremity of Greenland.

While it is to be doubted whether Biarne ever went south of Newfoundland, we see no reason for disbelieving the conclusions of Rafn and Kohl, that the followers of Biarne, Thorwald and Thorfinn Karlsefne, became familiar with Cape Cod and wintered at Vinland. There is no reasonable doubt but that they landed on Nova Scotia and possibly left their runic inscriptions on the shores at Falmouth, Nova Scotia; there is no reason to disbelieve the records which state that they wintered farther west where no snow fell, so that the cattle found their food in the open fields and wild grapes were abundant, as they certainly are in Rhode Island and Southern Massachusetts, as compared with Maine or Nova Scotia.

Without reasonable doubt, then, Helluland of the Norse and Icelandic records is Labrador, though it is not impossible that the bare and rocky coast of north-eastern Newfoundland was by some regarded as Helluland. It would be easy for a vessel in those days to pass by the

opening into the Strait of Belle Isle, and, owing to the somewhat similar scenic features of the two lands, to confound the north-eastern extremity of Newfoundland with Labrador.

That, as some have claimed, the Norsemen ever sailed through the Strait of Belle Isle, coasted along southern Labrador and wintered at the mouth of the river St. Lawrence, is certainly not supported by the early Norse records as interpreted by Kohl.

Their vessels sailed to the seaward of Newfoundland. That they did not feel drawn to sojourn in Helluland is no wonder. Its coast presented no more attractions than Greenland, while the grapes, food and furs, with the verdure and mild winter climate of "Vinland the Good," led to one expedition after another, as late perhaps as 1347, when, according to the Icelandic annals, "a vessel, having a crew of seventeen men, sailed from Iceland to Markland."

Then came the decadence of Norse energy and seamanship, succeeded by the failure of the Greenland colonies, which were overpowered and extinguished by the Eskimo. A dense curtain of oblivion thicker and more impenetrable than the fogs which still wrap the regions of the north, fell upon these hyperborean lands, until, in 1497, the veil was again withdrawn by an English hand.*

Since the foregoing remarks were sent to the printer, Prof. E. N. Horsford's address at the unveiling of the statue of Leif Eriksen has appeared. He also adopts

* The voyage of Szkolney, the Pole, to the coasts of Greenland and Labrador, is stated to have been performed in 1476. See Humboldt, *Examen Critique*, ii. p. 152. (N. A. Review, July, 1838, 179.)

the general opinion that Helluland was Newfoundland, but the language of these extracts convinces us still more that Helluland was Labrador.

In the first translation printed by Prof. Horsford of the Saga of Erik the Red, it is stated in the account of the expedition of Biarne, that after leaving Iceland bound for Greenland, he missed that country and was "borne before the wind for many days, they knew not whither," finally approaching land which "was not mountainous, but covered with wood," with rising ground in many parts. Then sailing two days, and putting the ship about, leaving the land on the left side, he saw land again, "low and level, and overgrown with wood." This land was probably Newfoundland, perhaps the southern or eastern part. We would, however, contend that the next or third land which Biarne saw was Labrador, for the Saga reads: "At length they hoisted sail, and turning their prow from land, they stood out again to sea; and having sailed three days with a south-west wind, they saw land the third time." This land was high and mountainous, and covered with ice. They asked Biarne whether he wished to land here. He said, "No; for this land appears to me little inviting." Without relaxing sail, therefore, they coasted along the shore till they perceived that this was an island. They then put the ship about, with the stern towards land, and stood out again to sea with the same wind, which blowing up very strong, Biarne desired his men to shorten sail, forbidding them to carry more sail than with such a heavy wind would be safe. "When they had thus sailed four days, they saw land the fourth time." Towards evening they reached the very promontory not far north of Cape Farewell, where Heriulf, the father of Biarne dwelt.

The high, mountainous land, covered with ice, was probably Labrador near Cape Harrison, or along the coast to the northward, and a Norseman's vessel, with a strong, fair wind, could probably sail from that part of the Labrador coast to near Cape Farewell, a distance of a little over 600 miles, in four days, allowing that a viking's ship of about 60 tons could sail from 8 to 10 miles an hour under a spanking breeze. Certainly they could not have made the distance from any part of Newfoundland, which is about 900 miles, in four days.

From the account of the expedition of Leif Eriksen:

"All being now ready, they set sail, and the first land to which they came was that last seen by Biarne.

"They made direct for land, cast anchor, and put out in a boat. Having landed, they found no herbage. All above were frozen heights; and the whole space between these and the sea was occupied by bare flat rocks; whence they judged this to be a barren land. Then said Leif, 'We will not do as Biarne did, who never set foot on shore: I will give a name to this land, and will call it "Helluland," [that is, land of broad stones].'" Here again we have a much better description of Labrador than of Northeastern Newfoundland. From there Leif sailed to what he called Markland, or "Land of Woods," which may have been Southern Newfoundland, or Eastern Nova Scotia, or Cape Breton, as it is but two days' sail from the Gut of Canso to Cape Cod; and the Vinland of Leif was undoubtedly the shore lying east and south of Cape Cod.

From Mr. J. Elliot Cabot's translation of the Saga relating to Biarne's voyage

(Mass. Quart. Rev. 1849, quoted by Horsford), we take the following reference to Helluland. As before, on returning from the south, after turning the bow of his vessel from the land and sailing out to sea for three days with a W.S.W. wind, Biarne saw a third land; "but that land was high, mountainous, and covered with glaciers;" then the wind rose, and they sailed four days to Heriulfsness.

A.D. 999, Leif set sail. "First they found the land which Biarne had found last. Then sailed they to the land and cast anchor, and put off a boat and went ashore, and saw there no grass. Mickle glaciers were over all the higher parts; but it was like a plain of rock from the glaciers to the sea, and it seemed to them that the land was good for nothing. Then said Leif, 'We have not done about this land like Biarne, not to go upon it; now I will give a name to the land and call it "Helluland" [flat-stone land].'

The north-eastern coast of Newfoundland is much lower, not mountainous, is somewhat wooded, with certainly more or less herbage on the outer islands and points. The rock formations are of later age than the Laurentian. We are familiar with the appearance of the Newfoundland side of the Strait of Belle Isle, which decidedly contrasts with that of Labrador opposite.